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SUBJECT: GLOBAL AIDS COORDINATOR VISITS LESOTHO; WANTS INCREASED USG EFFORT TO FIGHT AIDS

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1. SUMMARY. Chief of the Office of the U.S. Global AIDS Coordinator, Ambassador Randall Tobias, visited Maseru on July 22 to observe HIV/AIDS programs supported by the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) and managed by the U.S. Agency for International Development, the Centers for Disease Control and by the U.S. Embassy, followed by a visit on July 23 to Swaziland. Ambassador Tobias was accompanied by his advisors, as well as by staff from the USAID Regional HIV/AIDS Program (RHAP) and CDC Regional teams. Lesotho suffers from the third highest HIV prevalence rates in the world and faces multiple and urgent challenges. While support from the United States for HIV/AIDS has increased nearly five-fold in the last two years, Lesotho remains one of the poorest countries in Southern Africa with extremely limited capacity to mitigate the impact of HIV/AIDS. Ambassador Tobias met with senior government officials and visited U.S.-supported HIV/AIDS programs in the central government referral hospital and several community-based NGO's. He was impressed by efforts underway, but raised serious concerns about the magnitude of the HIV/AIDS problem in Lesotho. Ambassador Tobias invited the USG team to strategize bold and creative approaches to further assist the Government of Lesotho to strengthen their HIV/AIDS prevention, treatment, and care and support response. END SUMMARY

2. Ambassador Tobias met with a wide range of prominent government and non-government officials including the First Lady, Minister of Health, the Principal Secretary of Finance and Development Planning, Principal Secretary of Health, CEO of the National AIDS Secretariat, Ambassador of Lesotho to the United States, and Prince Seeiso. He was briefed by Ambassador Perry and the USG team and held a lunch meeting with key health sector and other government officials, multilateral donors, international organizations and civil society leaders involved in the fight against HIV/AIDS.

3. To gain a first-hand view of the health care system, Ambassador Tobias was guided by the Minister of Health Phooko through a tour of Queen Elizabeth II Hospital, the country's central referral hospital, where he observed activities and met with program staff from the Prevention of Mother to Child Transmission (PMTCT) program and the pediatric ward; the Anti-Retroviral Therapy clinic; and services for TB/HIV co-infection, supported by PEPFAR. In addition, he visited a mobile voluntary HIV counseling and testing unit (VCT) managed by a USG implementing partner. The Ambassador and his team visited a neighborhood NGO that receives assistance from the First Lady of Lesotho, a popular champion for HIV/AIDS in her country. The volunteer group works with community members to raise funds and provide care and support for families affected by HIV. The Ambassador and his team also visited the Lesotho Child Counseling Unit (LCCU), a NGO working with victimized children and orphans supported by the Ambassador's Special Self-Help fund and the Peace Corps. During his site visits, Ambassador Tobias spent time talking with local Basotho people, orphans, caregivers and people living with HIV/AIDS.

4. The briefings with the USG Team, government officials and other donor partners revealed a number of critical issues facing the country. Lesotho suffers from serious human resource deficits, including a health work force that is understaffed, often attracted to employment outside of the country, and which is equally affected by HIV infection like the general population they serve. The magnitude of the country's epidemic poses a tremendous economic burden on the public health sector in particular. Basic drugs, equipment, other material resources and infrastructural support are in desperately short supply and/or disrepair. In addition, the needs of women and children who are suffering most from the impact of HIV/AIDS in Lesotho tend to be overlooked. The USG response to these and other critical challenges to-date includes USG-funded programs, as well as leadership from Ambassador Perry. Ambassador Perry co-chairs the United Nations Expanded Theme Group on HIV/AIDS, chairs the USG Task Force Steering Committee and convenes regular HIV/AIDS Task Force meetings with the USG, Lesotho government, and other implementing partners to strengthen and coordinate the further development of USG support and response.

5. Ambassador Tobias and his staff were seriously concerned by

the gravity of the HIV problem in Lesotho and troubled by the devastating current and future consequences for every single sector; from health, to social, to economic, and political. Before his departure for the U.S., Ambassador Tobias discussed his impressions with the USG Southern Africa team, stating his visits to both Lesotho and Swaziland were among the most eye-opening and well-organized of his field visits to-date. Recognizing the crisis situation in both countries, Ambassador Tobias expressed that 'business as usual' would not be sufficient to address the severe prevention, treatment and care and support challenges in both countries. He asked the USG Southern Africa team to 'think out of the box' and to strategize

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bold and creative approaches for building and expanding the national HIV/AIDS response with USG support. Finally, Ambassador Tobias designated his Senior Advisor, Nazanin Samari-Kermani, as the focal person from the Office of the U.S. Global AIDS Coordinator who will ensure follow-up and continued commitment from the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief for Lesotho and Swaziland.

16. Media coverage of the visit was extensive. Post sent press releases to media organizations prior to the visit. Television, radio and print covered Ambassador Tobias' visit at a press event at LCCU. LTV, the only domestic television station broadcast the visit of Ambassador Tobias on the evening news. Radio stations, Radio Lesotho, Catholic radio, and Joy FM repeated the story over a three-day period. Public Eye, the most widely read domestic newspaper, and the Mirror, also with a high readership, published columns quoting from Ambassador Tobias' speech and information provided in Embassy press kits.

17. Comment: Ambassador Tobias' visit to Lesotho emphasized the US commitment to the fight against HIV/AIDS and reinforced mission activities with key factors in the fight against HIV/AIDS. The visit highlighted the collaborative work of the USG and the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare. The Minister of Health stated that having such senior-level US government visitors to Lesotho to discuss the issue of HIV/AIDS has highlighted the work of his Ministry and reinforced his Ministry's work at the health facilities, in the communities and with other government departments. End Comment.

18. This cable was cleared by OGAC, RHAP-Pretoria, and CDC-Pretoria.

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